

Student Writing and Academic Literacy Development at University

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of student academic writing in subject learning at university. It makes the case for embedding student writing and academic literacy pedagogy in curricula in the contemporary context of higher education in the UK. It begins with a critical review of discourses and practices in the last two decades and how student writing, as a vehicle for learning and acculturation into higher education practices and values, has been largely marginalised. It outlines the salient features of an alternative framing - the academic literacies approach – and the potential that it affords research into the student experience with writing and assessment. Evidence from the literature indicates that in the present context the need to integrate academic literacy pedagogy into mainstream curricula is more important than ever if higher education institutions are going to address their concerns with student retention, academic performance and learning gain. Practical approaches to integrating academic literacy pedagogy gleaned from the literature are critically discussed. A consensus which advocates the embedding of student writing and academic literacy as the most effective method is identified. Finally, the case is strengthened by considering current contextual challenges facing universities in the UK.

Keywords

Academic literacy | Assessment | Curricula | Learning gain

INTRODUCTION: THE MARGINALISATION OF STUDENT WRITING PEDAGOGY

Over the last two decades there has been a surge in scholarly interest in student writing in higher education in the UK. This has coincided with the transition from a selective to a mass system. With some exceptions (e.g., [Hounsell, 1997](#)), little attention had hitherto been given by educational researchers to student writing and its relationship to learning and academic success. It was tacitly assumed that students, given their prior educational experience, would have acquired the abilities and skills to ‘write’ in the subject, prepare for assessments and demonstrate their learning accordingly.

The first fees for higher education were charged to overseas students in the early 1980s. At the same time, universities began to look for ways in which to support students from broader social and educational backgrounds. Possibly conflicted by this at a time when a ‘liberal education’ was still regarded as a ‘social good’, a number of institutions began to offer pre-entry courses for international students, and ‘study skills’ provision at the institutional

level for domestic students. A template, albeit ad hoc and provisional, was created for attending to the needs of students deemed 'non-traditional'.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act augmented the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK by abolishing the divide between universities and polytechnics and subsequently raising the status of other suppliers. The watershed reform was the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997). The aims of constructing a 'learning society' fit for the future, increasing the leverage and influence of external stakeholders and modernising the sector to make it more 'accessible', 'transparent' and 'accountable' required measures to substantiate them. The skills agenda had percolated up from the compulsory and further education sectors. HEIs were encouraged to inaugurate 'key skills' into the fabric of their provision. As the sector expanded, so the unit of resource dwindled. In order to procure central funding, those universities which offered vocational and professional courses and were more teaching and recruiting orientated embraced skills and inaugurated them into their discourses and practices.

The taxonomy of skills includes 'basic skills', referring to competency in the technical abilities of reading and writing – grammar, spelling and punctuation, and 'key skills' used to refer to sets of competencies that may be useful in the 'learning society'. In terms of students' academic needs, the taxonomy included 'study skills' or decontextualized components such as 'learning to learn'. Underpinning the skills ideology and consistent with the values of the 'learning society' and 'the knowledge economy' is the notion of transferability, what is learnt in one context can be applied or transferred to another. Critics of this core belief claim it is an assertion with no empirical basis [see Hyland and Johnson (1998) for what was a timely critique of key and transferable skills in tertiary education]. This skills and competencies discourse, underpinned by transferability, became germane to the articulation of 'employability' and 'graduate skills' reinforcing the status and visibility of these values. However, research into how these notions can be addressed and concretised in university practices indicated that they are values best served by students' awareness of, and ability to articulate their learning in the subject, rather than the inclusion of piecemeal approaches that take up time and space in curricula (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

The second development of major significance was the move to modularity in degree structures which was instrumental in facilitating flexible patterns of participation by increasing student choice and providing new curricular opportunities.

Students could assemble degree structures of their choosing and accrue credits for courses completed over time and in different locations. Ivanic and Lea (2006) point out that changes introduced 'new contexts' as the number of joint and disciplinary hybrid degree structures expanded exponentially presenting new challenges in terms of student writing and assessment requirements. Students who enter university under the aegis of widening participation and seeking modular degree structures are likely to be course switching and required to write in diverse ways for diverse coursework requirements which may seem contradictory (Lea and Street, 1998). Traditional students may be entering degree structures that do not completely reflect their previous experience of writing at A-level. In addition, applied areas such as nursing, health care, social work and teacher education for example, have had to 'discipline' in order to comply with sector-wide standards for degrees, with implications for the range of writing practices linked to coursework that is expected (Baynham, 2000). The tacit assumption that even ostensibly well-prepared students have the literacy skills they need on entry is called into question.

The extensive use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) within HEIs became essential for the delivery of the modular model. Courses were benchmarked for standards and government agencies were set up (e.g., the Quality Assurance Agency) to foster and monitor implementation. Modularisation and the cross-curricular skills agenda led to the overloading of curricula and debates about what could be included or left out (Bridges, 2000). The structures, artefacts and discourses which pervade today's lived experience for students and teaching staff came into being – teaching and learning committees, teaching and learning strategies, assessment criteria, module guides, and the mandatory use of virtual learning environments, for example. A concurrent development was the adoption of the semester system by many universities and the consequent end-loading of assessments (Hounsell, 2003).

In response to pressures on curricula, HEIs were encouraged to engage with 'formative learning' (Yorke, 2003) and actively incorporate this into pedagogical interactions. However, as a result of pressures on both lecturers' time and on space in curricula, much of this maybe routinely detached from subject teaching, for example, loaded onto VLEs or consigned to study guides and the like, automated or in print form, at the departmental or institutional levels (Yorke, 2005; Bailey, 2010).

Assessment criteria and learning outcomes reflect a constructivist approach in which learning, curriculum

goals and feedback are, in theory, 'aligned' (Biggs, 2003). Elander *et al.* (2006) explored the meanings of core assessment criteria around writing to determine what kinds of knowledge are separable from subject knowledge. Their work stretched the skills taxonomy to include 'generic' (transferable) and 'complex' skills; the former are associated with 'lower level' learning and the latter with higher level or deep learning in the subject (Entwhistle, 1987; Biggs, 2003). But they conclude that what is a 'generic' skill in one context of subject learning is a 'complex' one in another. In addition, parity in standards and transparency across subject areas became a priority with policy makers.

Research into how far this can be achieved revealed two things about the student and teacher experiences: (i) students often find criteria unclear and prefer to seek clarification from lecturers, or, when direct help is unavailable, from support specialists, externally located and with no corresponding disciplinary background (Bloxham and West, 2007); and (ii) lecturers, within and across subject areas rarely agree on what they mean by the criteria used as they may subscribe to tacit understandings linked to disciplinary differences. Learning outcomes and assessment criteria do not necessarily function to reinforce a shared language (Bloxham, 2009; Bailey and Garner, 2010) as intended, and are not always transparent for learners (Carless, 2006) with potentially deleterious implications for the efficacy of these constructs in supporting the progression and success of all students.

Since the inauguration of the National Student Survey in 2005, feedback and marking have consistently been areas of student dissatisfaction. Feedback is a cornerstone of formative learning but it is often received after, rather than before, assessment and focused on the product. When students are writing a variety of assignment types there may be limited carry over or feed-forward (Bailey, 2009). Catt and Gregory (2006) point out that students receive little support at the 'point of writing', that is in the early, formative stages. They contend that writing is usually assessed but rarely taught in higher education. However, the iterative nature of writing - and learning through writing - is well served by formative interventions at various stages if students are to progress both their writing and subject learning.

The evidence presented here indicates that higher education reforms led to the diminution of writing as a key part of the learning process. Learning about writing at university is separated from mainstream instruction and curricula, and this is compounded by a skills and outcomes conception of learning.

What is highlighted in the foregoing critical review is how little space there is for pedagogical interactions within curricula for a vitally important element integral to learning how to write and prepare for assessment at university - process.

Academic Literacies

Student writing is more than simply the exposition of content knowledge. Students are expected to become academically literate. This is a more encompassing term and views writing as inextricably linked with learning in the subject. Students are required to extend their knowledge in their areas of study through the processes of reading and writing and adapt to new ways of understanding, interpreting and developing acceptable ways of representing knowledge. They may have to assimilate a variety of practices within different discipline areas.

According to Lea and Street (1998), it is the situated and varied nature of these practices and expectations across and within disciplines and departments that are often a source of problems for students as learners and apprentice writers. The emphasis is on the cultural and contextual dimensions of reading and writing practices, knowledge and meaning making processes students engage with in the subject. Success at university, therefore, depends on being able to manage and engage with the complex demands and varied expectations of location and context, writing in different subject areas, for different tutors in and across disciplinary domains.

Literacy learning is a matter of 'social practices' rather than a set of cognitive and technical skills that once learnt allows us to be (functionally) literate and which 'transfer' across contexts. A major (common sense) assumption about literacy is challenged, that it is a single variable with an upper case 'L' and a singular 'y'. In place of Literacy there should be 'literacies' (Street, 1993). Problems students have with writing, and therefore learning, are considered at the level of epistemologies, disciplinary practices and discourses rather than as 'deficits' requiring various kinds of remedial support. Academic staff, when faced with different student expectations about appropriate writing practices, need to consider how knowledge is constructed in their own fields and how they can make this clear to students.

Integral to a literacies perspective is the role of language in the student experience of learning (Lillis, 2001; Ivanic and Lea, 2006). Language is not a transparent medium in

which meanings are easily transferable. Conventional terms – structure, evaluation, critique and argumentation – are defined by epistemologies and situated expectations calling into question that they are acquired incrementally and that students are able to read off meanings from textual sources such as guides, assessment criteria and various forms of documentation that are part of the student experience. Students’ reading and writing can benefit from explicit help with the linguistic codes and conventions that are characteristic of the ways of structuring texts, and how they make meaning in their respective subject area(s) and the context dependent linguistic repertoires they are normally expected to assimilate (Coffin *et al.*, 2003). Hence, language plays a central role in the development of subject learning, assessment and understanding formative feedback, rendering it a focus for pedagogic research within a literacies framing.

An additional strand to the literacies approach is that student success is also linked to issues of their identity and the negotiation of power. Students from wider ranging backgrounds entering both traditional and new spaces in higher education may feel constrained by conventional writing practices. For example, they may often become preoccupied with form and feel there is only one way; hence writing at university itself becomes a barrier. They may be inclined to view formal conventions as over-prescriptive and stifling and wish to challenge canonical writing requirements and practices.

A literacies perspective, therefore, provides a critique of the dominant skills model of learning and the rationale underpinning it when applied to writing and academic literacy learning. The locus of research is shifted from the student (deficits with) to the institution and those practices that may militate against students’ participation and success. It foregrounds the role of language and takes a critical stance towards the texts and communicative practices of higher education (Lea and Street, 1999). Furthermore it facilitates research into some of the more under-examined and subtle aspects of students’ experience. Overall, it is both a critique frame and a more holistic lens through which to examine factors that contribute to students’ engagement or non-completion (Table 1).

Lillis (2000) noted that, taken together, this challenges the view of student ‘writing’ as simply a problem requiring some form of remedial provision; instead it can be viewed in more neutral terms as a phenomenon to be explored. Lea and Stierer (2000, p. 3) refer to what they term ‘a social practice and contextual’ approach to student writing and learning which takes into account the “important changes in the policy and practice of higher education institutions in recent years” and places them “at the heart of research...” (ibid.).

However, while ‘literacies’ has focused on practices in the academy which facilitate participation, it has not

Table 1: How a literacies perspective contrasts with currently dominant approaches to literacy in the academy.

Skills and Services	Literacies or Discourses
Bolt-on	Built in
Generic and stand-alone (decontextualized)	Situated and contextualised
Writing as a technical and individual skill	writing as situated and contextualised social practice
Transferable across disciplinary contexts	How to ‘do’ learning in the subject
Detachable/generic	Embedded
Deficits in students	Barriers in curricula preventing ‘participation’
Remediation	Education
Endorses the tacit nature of traditional higher education values and practices	Challenges higher education to make explicit its practices and conventional values
Language as a transparent medium: autonomous and largely independent of context	Language as context dependent and meanings associated with epistemologies and practices
Academic culture as homogeneous	Culture(s) as distinct/diverse
Ignores the structural changes in higher education	Structural change as integral to theory, practice and researching the student experience/supporting learning, assessment practices and student retention and completion

Source: Bailey (2016).

translated into specific pedagogical methods (Wingate *et al.*, 2011). Literacies researchers, given the nature of literacies thesis, have been averse to recommending pedagogical models which focus on specific subject learning contexts, as this endorses a view of academic culture as homogeneous and the notion that what is learnt in one context is easily transferable to another, reproducing, in their view, a deficit model akin to the rationale underpinning the skills and competencies approach.

Notwithstanding this position, in the next section evidence is provided which supports the case for embedding academic literacies learning in pedagogical practice, especially in the early stages of study.

The Case for Curricular Change

The literacies approach moves the emphasis away from deficits in students to the contexts of writing and assessment at the departmental and institutional levels.

On the other hand, the 'preparedness' of students entering higher education as their numbers expand is a source of consternation elsewhere in the literature (Lowe and Cook, 2003; Thomas, 2002). A focus has been on the writing experiences of students in schools and further education colleges. Itua *et al.* (2014) link the problems students have with writing within two developments in the compulsory and further education sectors. The rise of league tables on which schools are judged, has led, inadvertently, to approaches to teaching that focus on exam results. As a consequence, students rarely write extensively outside exam conditions and rely on the regurgitation of material for exam success. The gist here is that these entrants may not have the capabilities and propensities to adjust to and engage with traditional higher education practices, expectations and values at the outset; and that this is more the norm than the exception. Lowe and Cook (2003) noted that it is during the first major assessment period students are most vulnerable. Itua *et al.* (*op. cit.* p. 320), point out that 'the most common first piece of assessment at university is an extended essay, and the assessment period is a major drop-out rate for first year students'.

Haggis (2006) challenges universities to respond holistically. Instead of being preoccupied with perceived 'deficiencies' in students and how to accommodate them, we should be considering what aspects of the higher education experience we could adjust. Haggis (2006) focuses on potential barriers in the curriculum and calls for pedagogies which embrace 'diversity'. In the context of expanding student numbers, students may lack necessary familiarity with process

regarding institutional and curricular expectations and the orientation of the discipline to become engaged in the critical and analytical ways teachers expect. They need explicit support with both the linguistic and stylistic forms and the tacit conventions surrounding academic writing such as critique, evaluation, appropriate support and referencing and making content relevant to the question and the discussion expected (*cf.* Wingate, 2006). It is "*learning how to do learning in that subject*" (Haggis, 2006, p. 532). Haggis points out that these are 'educational processes': they are 'defined by the institution and the discipline' (*op. cit.* p. 534). Haggis (2006) alludes to the challenge this presents to higher education's perennial fears about 'dumbing down'.

Furthermore, concerns about student academic writing and degree completion are not confined to undergraduate entrants. Recent research in the field of student academic writing has revealed problems of self-efficacy experienced by many graduate students as they engage with complex academic writing projects as a major cause of their non-completion. It is in the best interests of all concerned that these students are provided with writing and academic literacy support at the institutional and department levels (Huerta *et al.*, 2017).

On the basis of research done in higher education colleges in the US, Arum and Roska (2011) claim that the experience in the mass system for many students is characterised by limited or no academic learning in their first years. Surveys revealed that large numbers of students enrol on courses that involve assignments with limited reading and writing requirements. HEIs are 'academically adrift'; there is an emphasis on instrumentalism and outcomes in degree level education, but a lack of commitment in the sector to undergraduate academic growth (Arum and Roska, 2011). Yet universities continue to emphasise the quality of their graduates in terms of traditional values such as critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical reasoning and writing (*cf.* Knight and Yorke, 2003).

There are ramifications for how a university education is perceived in the public domain, the relative value of university degrees and for the stratification of universities. There is evident concern about this amongst policy makers in the UK. A new term has entered the lexicon - learning gain. HEIs are required to demonstrate how they address this. It is a value integral to the newly established teaching excellence framework (TEF), a yardstick with which institutions are measured on the quality of their provision and attendance to the student experience. Since the complete removal of the block grant for teaching, HEIs in England are

responsible for the management of teaching and learning in their own contexts and how income from student fees are used to that end.

Embedding Academic Literacies in Mainstream Teaching: Models and Practices

In this section some curriculum models which address the concerns so far outlined are presented and critically considered. The spectrum runs from bolt-on and adjunct models – partially integrated with subject teaching – to embedded models and approaches. The limitations of bolt-on provision are well attested to in the literature. [Warren \(2002\)](#) itemises their shortcomings. Bolt-on models are frequently reliant on voluntary participation. Students struggling with a full curriculum load already are often disinclined to commit to extra non-credit bearing ‘support’ modules or services. Students advised or even obliged to take these courses may feel resentful or stigmatised as provision is predicated on remediation. Optional extras often fail to reach unmotivated or academically weak students. There are questions over transferability to target study especially where there is a generic study skills emphasis (*cf.* [Lea and Street, 1998](#)). Moreover, because limited time is available bolt-on provision inhibits deeper learning and understanding of the subject in discipline specific terms; learners get stuck at border-line levels of performance, scraping through rather than excelling.

[Haggis \(2006\)](#) claims that remedial approaches pathologise students. [Wingate \(2006; 2015\)](#) questions the efficacy of an arrangement regarded as ad hoc and outmoded in the contemporary context and calls for more inclusive approaches relevant to a wider range of entrants. [Wingate et al. \(2011\)](#) noted that, at the time of writing, there was little evidence of embedded models in UK HEIs. Innovations are restricted to extra-curricular initiatives or structures such as writing centres at individual institutions ([Ganobscik-Williams, 2006](#)) where student writing research and pedagogy have gained some traction through institutional support.

Adjunct models fare better. A specific development in the US has been the writing across the disciplines (WAC) movement that recognises the need to support students from disadvantaged social groups with the literacy requirements needed to engage with higher education. WAC is an adjunct model and delivered alongside mainstream subject teaching. Alongside WAC there are also writing in the discipline programmes (WiD) available to students in their first year, although WAC is the more prevalent

(Monroe, 2003).

In the US colleges and schools system a model exists which seeks to directly integrate language and literacy learning with subject learning – content-based instruction ([Brinton et al., 2003](#)). This approach to embedding academic literacy in content learning has been applied in the UK context with the pre-entry (pre-sessional) course experience for international students with the intention to provide a more holistic learning experience as a way of circumventing the limitations of bolt-on provision and decontextualized skills ([Bailey and Sercombe 2007, 2008](#)). Learning is embedded in content to imbue the experience with authenticity, allow for pre-writing activities and incorporate a process approach to more extended and assessed pieces of written work.

The spectrum runs from overtly adjunct solutions to more embedded models which involve more direct collaboration between student writers, writing specialists and subject teachers. [Coffin et al. \(2003\)](#) outline a model for academic writing pedagogy suitable for higher education learning which works from process to product in four stages: building the context by generating ideas about a topic and considering available reading sources; modelling and deconstruction in which students write about the topic but with some guidance on structure and organisation; this leads into joint construction in which students draft more extensively working with peers and receive only global advice from lecturers; culminating in the independent construction phase or the writing of the final ‘product’ The model is based on principles of ‘scaffolded’ learning ([Bruner, 1966](#)) and emphasises process. However, it may be countered that such embedded approaches are rarely practical given pressures in the curriculum and workload demands of teaching staff; hence the proliferation of bolt-on provision and service structures.

In other Anglophone countries, parallel developments in reforms have resulted in the same constraints within curricula but there are examples of embedded initiatives, for example, in the Australian context [Durkin and Main \(2002\)](#) working with undergraduate students, and [Baik and Greig \(2009\)](#) with international post-graduate students, respectively. In both cases the aim was to integrate academic literacy with mainstream instruction in the subject and positive outcomes were identified. However, teaching assistants and casual tutors were used and worked in cooperation rather than in collaboration. The role of the writing specialists was predominantly to do what the lecturer was not. [McWilliams and Allen \(2014\)](#) describe tailored interventions which embed academic literacy pedagogy in a university in New Zealand. They conclude

that optimum results are achieved when lecturers and literacy specialists collaborate and share methodologies and materials in joint endeavours within curricula.

Collaboration implies more parity in the respective roles of writing and subject specialists. The former often have academic backgrounds themselves in relevant areas especially applied linguistics research and expertise in English for specific and academic purposes (ESP/EAP). There is potential for a synergy which can deliver optimally for supporting students' learning and literacy development. Elton (2010, p. 151) points out that seldom is writing pedagogy 'a constructive collaboration among equals', the writing specialist with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge about texts and writing and the subject specialist with epistemic knowledge of the discipline. Research into language use in academic and professional settings identified particular situated and contextual ways in which professional and disciplinary communication takes place (e.g., Berkenhotter and Huckin, 1995) - how writers get things done with texts and what rhetorical resources they use to achieve their aims. The work of Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) has been among the most influential and allowed for the specification of academic 'discourse communities'. This links linguistic knowledge with other theories of learning - the ways in which the artefacts of a given community are typically written with what is needed to become integrated into 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), an induction or apprenticeship model of learning resonant with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1966).

Chanock *et al.* (2012) describe closer collaboration on an initiative in the Australian context in which the non-subject specialist brings perspectives on reading from applied linguistics research to enable the lecturers to support students in an informed way, thus altering the roles. Students were helped to engage with scholarly texts in the first year of study. The researchers noted the reciprocal benefits for students, teachers and managers as the latter groups were able to re-examine a number of their preconceptions about their students' abilities to engage with academic texts and recognise and control the reading and writing conventions of their discipline and in their feedback practices.

Wingate (2012) point out that while such approaches raise awareness and foster greater collaboration between writing specialists and subject teachers in the delivery of curricula, they fall short if the subject lecturers are not directly and centrally involved at the level of instruction. It is they who teach and devise assessments for students and have most influence over what is accorded importance. Research aimed

to explore the feasibility and efficaciousness of embedded approaches. An early intervention study with first year undergraduates in their first term involved the creation of a module which included on-line academic literacy components devised in conjunction with the writing specialists. It was delivered by lecturers, incorporated into the curriculum and credit bearing hence addressing some of the short-comings of bolt-ons outlined earlier.

The case study included empirical elements in the form of questionnaires and follow-up interviews with students and lecturers and the monitoring of log-in time by student users. Lecturers recognised and valued the aims of the project, hence attitudes were not a barrier. They also indicated how it helped them to better understand the academic literacy demands of their students and examine some of their own assumptions and practices.

There were two principal insights. Firstly teachers were concerned about the time needed to engage with the formative learning requirements of the module - assessment and tutorial slots - given their workloads. Secondly, students indicated that once learning materials were up-loaded they were rarely mentioned again by the lecturers and became an opt-out from direct teaching. At that point the materials also became a low priority for students who regarded them as less relevant than timetabled activities.

A subsequent intervention sought to build on the experience and empirical findings of the first in order to effect embedded instruction which addressed these concerns. The module approach was replaced with team-teaching sessions involving the subject and writing specialists working in collaboration. In addition, the evaluation data had indicated that first year students showed a preference for working with student rather than the expert texts which constitute the 'readings lists' that accompany assessments.

Earlier empirical research into the preparedness of students in a widening participation university revealed that novice student writers often lack confidence with using academic reading sources. Even though they may spend the considerable time and effort required to engage with such texts prior to writing for assessment, they lack familiarity in the early stages of study with the expectations of higher education and the ways they are required to address assignment questions - evaluate, critically analyse and so on - how reading sources present arguments and different perspectives on topics, how to identify and synthesise these, and how to develop a critical discursive position (reported in Wingate, 2015).

In order for this approach to work a corpus of students' work needs to be available. The subject specialist chooses, from the corpus, exemplar texts of good or weak assignments. This is communicated to the writing specialist who prepares the materials employing the descriptive, meta-textual procedures from social genre analysis to explain textual structure and communicative purpose (addressing the assignment question) while also explicitly drawing attention to appropriate modes of expression for achieving this. The subject specialist is the authority on the epistemic aspects of learning and is present in the teaching and learning interactions. The approach supports an embedded arrangement, focused on process and understanding which involves subject lecturers in delivery working in collaboration with writing specialists. The synergy advocated by [Elton \(2010\)](#) is effectively operationalised while feasibly working within curriculum and workload constraints. [Wingate \(2014\)](#) also points out how this approach can work with postgraduate students where intakes may be smaller and seminar sessions remain a feature of teaching interactions. Such students, in particular in applied areas of study, may also be 'non-traditional' (e.g., mature-age, returnees to education or international students), hence the model is versatile as well as inclusive. [Wingate \(2014\)](#) calls for more case studies for embedded, collaborative and inclusive practices and the wider dissemination of results.

CONCLUSION

I began with a critical review of the developments in higher education in the UK - the discourses, structures and curriculum practices within the last two decades - which have shaped and defined the experience of both learning and teaching. I outlined the salient aspects of an alternative understanding of student writing and academic literacy (here referred to as the literacies perspective), which affords more possibilities for researching the experience of learning and teaching in the current context and places student writing and academic literacy development at its centre.

The evidence from the wider literature reviewed here reveals an emerging consensus that HEIs need to reassess their expectations and practices and respond innovatively to increasing diversity in the student body addressing retention, inclusion and student performance. The position here is that this is best achieved by embedding academic literacy pedagogy in mainstream curricula. I conclude by focusing on additional points which strengthen the case for this position

Data from [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(2017\)](#) indicate that dropout and non-completion in UK HEIs rates are rising. Non-continuation is highest within two groups: eighteen to nineteen year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature age students. Research recently conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England revealed that one in five students does not progress straight to year two; attrition is highest among students from under-represented social groups ([Else, 2017](#)). The recruiting and teaching intensive institutions have the highest rates of non-continuation. Secondly, evidence that students are being effectively welcomed and inducted into higher education is contradicted by the exponential rise in illicit services such as 'essay-mills'.

At the time of writing, it has been announced that universities will be required to be more stringent in tackling these problems. However, higher education has no constructive and effective solution to plagiarism and academic misconduct. Software detection and sanctions do not constitute education; only the latter will properly address this problem. As [Haggis \(2006\)](#) pointed out, we need to look at how aspects of the curriculum and traditional practices may militate against participation, and adjust.

Thirdly, whilst universities will continue to be regulated by government agencies for the quality and standards of their provision and how they address the student experience, the withdrawal of the block grant to support teaching makes them more directly responsible for developing their learning and teaching practices than at any time in the past.

The TEF is a new horizon which offers opportunities, but it has yet to bed down. As it does, it is likely to emphasise the quality and enhancement of teaching and learning within curricula. The newly established Office for Students (OfS), which now directs the TEF, has announced that it is a 'priority' to reduce dropout rates and 'improve students' chances of achieving a good degree regardless of (social) background' ([Pells, 2018](#)). Public opinion will exert pressure on policy makers to require HEIs to demonstrate learning gain of their students in tangible and manifest ways across areas of study (*cf.* [Arum and Roska, 2011](#)). But this is also a precarious time for HEIs. In the current higher education market place and changing higher education landscape there may be a tendency for resources to be moved away from front line teaching and learning to marketing and customer care, strengthening an orientation towards the student as customer as competition amongst the recruiting institutions intensifies ([Temple et al., 2016](#)).

The sector may further bifurcate with the recruiting

universities centralising services and implementing economy of scale measures which could create an inhospitable environment for innovation. Nonetheless, the management of the student experience can only benefit from opening up and encouraging dialogue and communication between teaching staff, literacy specialists and managers with a view to enhancing mutual understandings, cooperation and collaboration around practices and provision. This will be the challenge for institutional governance going forward.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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